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# Slaughter of the Innocents

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**Text: Matthew 2:13-18 (The Holy Innocents, Martyrs)**

**W**e have heard a lot about “El Nino”. According to a recent Associated Press article, “El Nino is a periodic weather-disrupting condition in the tropical Pacific in which westward-blowing trade winds weaken, allowing warm water to drive east to South America....”

El Nino caused snow to fall in southern California, and earlier in December [1997], snow fell in Mexico for the first time in more than one hundred years!

The newspaper article continues:

“The name [‘El Nino’] is Spanish for [‘the child’, and it is traditionally connected with] baby Jesus because the huge, warm pool usually arrives around Christmas...” (*The Record*, Dec. 20, 1997, p. A7).

El Nino, it seems to me, nicely ties together the themes that emerge from today’s Gospel reading. In it we find “the child”—baby Jesus—and we see the disruption his birth brought into the lives of King Herod, his own refugee family, and the young mothers and fathers of Bethlehem, whose innocent little “ninos” were executed by soldiers carrying out orders.

All of this serves to remind us of another image of little children that has been captured on our television screens in recent weeks. This one is not like the images of laughing, wide-eyed Mexican “ninos”

who've never seen snow before frolicking in the miracle—like the ancient people of God receiving manna from heaven in the wilderness. No. This is an image of some innocent little “ninos” of Rwanda waiting, with bloated bellies and worried parents, for the garbage trucks to unload at the local dump so they can rummage through the trash in hope of finding their daily bread!

Poverty is a killer of innocent children, as effective as any sword in King Herod's arsenal. Now, I don't pretend to know enough about Rwanda to make a fair, moral judgment on such abominable conditions; but we all know enough about human nature to recognize that there's not much difference between our society and theirs, morally speaking. Whether it's ancient Israel under Herod, or modern-day Rwanda or Canada, such “suffering of innocent children is not an accident of fate, or the will of God. It is the result of political will.”<sup>1</sup>

It will not surprise you to hear that “there are politicians” at all levels of government “who have done everything in their power to cut welfare, food, housing” and health care programs here at home. They have also cut foreign aid budgets. It seems clear that “when ever governments need to ‘tighten the belt’ it's always around the necks of the poor—and children suffer most!”

Nearly two million Canadian children live in poverty today, and the number increases daily! “Any government policy that makes a child's life more miserable is an abomination” before the Lord. “It breaks the heart of God. And any society that allows such conditions” to develop, whether around the corner or around the world, “loses any claim to being a moral one”—much less a faithful one.

“You and I are part of the tragedy” we call ‘child poverty’. “In a democratic society our elected leaders carry out the will of the people.” In other words, child poverty is the result of our shared values and our political choices. Whether it's by our votes or by our silence, we've allowed the innocent suffering going on in Rwanda and in Canada to happen.

“We who are the descendants of the Old Testament prophets, and followers of Jesus Christ, simply cannot abandon the world's children.” We who claim to stand in the Judeo-Christian heritage are called to hold up, vigilantly, the plight of the little “ninos” and proclaim God's word of justice publicly, if our vocation as disciples of

“El Nino”—the Christ Child—is to have any credibility or integrity.

As we celebrate the birth of El Nino—the child Jesus—let us remember that we are all “el ninos”—the children of one heavenly Father. And let our New Year’s resolution be to join our voices in the inconsolable lament of Mother Rachel, mourning over the suffering of innocent children, in Ramah and Rwanda, in Canada, in Bethlehem, and wherever the lives of little “ninos” are disrupted by the values of greed and violence.

I leave you with the words U.S. First Lady, Hilary Clinton spoke on Christmas Eve as part of the president’s Christmas greeting to the American people. Reflect on them as you ponder your own New Year’s resolutions, and hear them as your invitation to hold our public leaders accountable for what they say and do—or fail to do—about child poverty. That’s our calling; that’s our mission.

Here’s what Ms. Clinton said: “This Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of a homeless child, who grew up to be the Prince of Peace, let us all cherish the gift of every child among us; and let us pledge ourselves to building a better world, where all children—no matter where they are born—can thrive and make their dreams come true.”

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Material in quotation marks reflect my notes on Dr. George Regas’ Lutheran Life Lectures at Mount Zion Lutheran Church, Waterloo, Ontario, 10 October 1996.